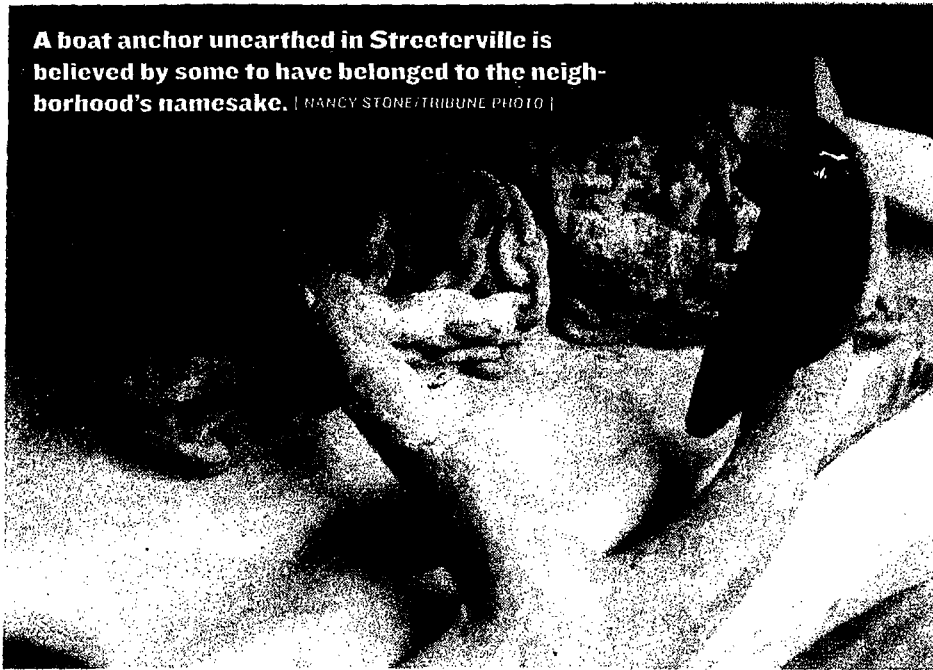




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A boat anchor unearthed in Streeterville is believed by some to have belonged to the neighborhood's namesake. [NANCY STONE/TRIBUNE PHOTO]



Anchorman

Excavation crewmen may have unearthed piece of city's history

Deep underneath a Streeterville street, John Henry Propeck was moving pile after pile of debris and sandy soil to create an underground parking garage for a new 47-story condo building at the corner of Illinois Street and McClurg Court.

Then he scooped up a chunk of metal in the bucket of his backhoe. The next load unearthed a T-shaped bar, then a 40-foot chain. When he pieced the parts together last month, he realized he had discovered a 200-pound boat anchor buried deep beneath Chicago's streets.

The anchor is a rusty reminder that the solid ground Chicago is built on wasn't always so solid, and that boats were once moored in what now is the Streeterville neighborhood. Those who pulled the

anchor from the earth are even asking whether it could have belonged to Capt. George Streeter, a gun-running hustler who supposedly ran his vessel aground 450 feet from Lake Michigan's shore in 1886 and decided to stay put, creating the neighborhood that bears his name.

Propeck and a few members of the excavation crew knew none of the history until an acquaintance half-jokingly suggested the anchor could have belonged to Streeter. They fiddled around on the Internet until they found a picture of Streeter standing by his ship, the Reutan, with a similar anchor chained to its prow.

"I think it's pretty interesting," said Propeck, who has been a construction worker in Chicago for more than 25 years. It would be difficult to verify that the anchor was Streeter's, said Libby Mahoney, chief curator of the Chicago Historical Society. Its rusted surface and clunky chain bear no mark other than the number 97.



Mike Joyce/R5/USEPA/US

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Streeterville relic-history or just junk?

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By Alexa Aguilar
Tribune staff reporter

May 8, 2007

Deep underneath a Streeterville street, John Henry Propeck was moving pile after pile of debris and sandy soil to create an underground parking garage for a new 47-story condo building at the corner of Illinois Street and McClurg Court.

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The anchor is a rusty reminder that the solid ground Chicago is built on wasn't always so solid, and that boats were once moored in what is now the Streeterville neighborhood. Those who pulled the anchor from the earth are even asking whether it could have belonged to Capt. George Streeter, a gun-running hustler who supposedly ran his vessel aground 450 feet from Lake Michigan's shore in 1886 and decided to stay put, creating the neighborhood that bears his name.

Streeter is the stuff of Chicago legend, a man who defied city officials who tried to take his "District of Lake Michigan" -- the hundreds of acres of landfill that eventually amassed around the beached boat where Streeter and his fellow scofflaws drank, ran brothels and generally reveled in ignoring authority.

Propeck and a few members of the excavation crew knew none of the history until an acquaintance half-jokingly suggested that the anchor could have belonged to Streeter. They fiddled around on the Internet until they found a picture of Streeter standing by his ship, the Reutan, with a similar anchor chained to its prow. "I think it's pretty interesting," said Propeck, who has been a construction worker in Chicago for more than 25 years. "I've never got nothing like this before. I've found safes before with holes bored through them. But nothing like this."

It would be difficult to verify that the anchor was Streeter's, said Libby Mahoney, chief curator of the Chicago Historical Society. Its rusted surface and clunky chain bear no lettering or mark other than the number 97.

The anchor appears to be a standard fisherman's anchor from that era, Mahoney said.

Whether the anchor actually belonged to Streeter's vessel, the discovery is enough to excite Chicagoans, she said.

"All of this points to the fact that Chicagoans love the history of their city," she said. "They are proud of it. And they take their history very seriously."

MCL Companies, the developer of the Park View condos, is considering making the anchor a fixture of the park that will sit adjacent to the property.

Russell Lewis, chief historian of the Chicago History Museum, said the anchor's discovery is interesting, if only to remind Chicagoans that Streeterville was once in Lake Michigan. It's possible the anchor was Streeter's, but it could have been from other vessels that traveled the shoreline, he said.

"That's the one boat we know," Lewis said. "That's why people jump to conclusions. But there are the ones we don't know about," whose owners didn't decide to squat on the land where they wrecked, he said.

Still, Lewis said, it's a wonderful story and the discoverers should be excited about finding a possible remnant of history.

"It's a mystery," he said. "What's discouraging is that you can reach a point where you just can't tell for sure."

Dick Bales, an author of a book about the Great Chicago Fire, is in the midst of writing a volume about Streeter. He also works as assistant regional counsel for Chicago Title, the company that Streeter repeatedly sparred with over his land claims.

The more he researches him, the more he's learning to doubt any legend surrounding Streeter, even his name, Bales said.

Though Streeter's famous nickname "Cap Streeter" stems from Streeter's claim that he was a captain in the Civil War, he never made it past the rank of private, Bales said.

And there is some evidence that the tale of the boat wrecked on the sandbar was made up by Streeter to justify his squatting, Bales said.

"Everything about him is a lie, even his name," he said.

The variations on the Streeter story make him a favorite of Chicago history lovers.

"He's fascinating," Mahoney said. "He's a great Chicago legend."

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